

Miscellaneous Notes

1. POSSIBLE FUNCTION OF THE TIGER'S WHISKERS

It is a well known fact that the sense of smell of both the tiger and the leopard is very poorly developed. I have seen plenty of evidence for this in my own experience, and I do not think that any experienced big game hunter or naturalist will dispute this. And yet both these animals live by stalking and killing those animals (herbivores) whose sense of smell is very strongly developed. The tiger and the leopard therefore have learned over the course of centuries that if they are to succeed in killing the animals they eat, they must make due allowance for the latter's sense of smell, i.e. before the final fatal assault they must approach their quarry from a down-wind direction. Strangely enough a man-eating tiger or leopard will take the same precaution when stalking a human being! Old habits and instincts die hard. Now every hunter who has hunted bison and buffalo on foot, or even tried to stalk chital or sambar, knows how difficult it is very often inside the jungle to know or find out the direction of the wind. How does a tiger or a leopard find this out in a similar situation? They have the added difficulty of being much lower on the ground while stalking.

It is my belief that they do it with the aid of their very long whiskers. These long filaments, which are as thin as human hair at their tips—gradually thickening inwards till they become quite thick and stiff at the roots—act like so many delicate antennae which together constitute a very effective wind gauge. The slightest movement of the fine tips is carried to the stiff roots and thence to the sensory nerves of the upper lip. Could one think of any other biological reason or use for these very peculiar and prominent whiskers in the 'great cats'? I suppose the final test of the theory could be carried out if one could cut off the whiskers of a tiger and then see if he could make use of the wind in his hunting—but I have not been able to do that!

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